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## INDIGENOUS ECOTOURISM AS A POVERTY ERADICATION STRATEGY: A CASE STUDY OF THE MAASAI PEOPLE IN THE AMBOSELI REGION OF KENYA

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**ABSTRACT** Ecotourism is presently promoted as a lethal weapon to fight poverty in many developing countries including Kenya. While much of the empirical and theoretical literature on tourism has largely dwelt on the negative socio-economic impacts, there is comparatively limited research that examines tourism's contribution to poverty reduction especially within the Kenyan context. A case study of the Maasai people living on the fringes of Amboseli national park in Kenya was undertaken to find out the role of indigenous ecotourism on poverty alleviation. A mixed method qualitative study was carried out in the months of November and December 2015. The findings show that the Maasai people participate in indigenous ecotourism through their community-based cultural boma tourism enterprises and that many people have a positive attitude towards this form of tourism because it utilizes locally available resources (culture), vests ownership and control firmly in local hands, provides opportunities for people without education and business skills especially women to participate, and the benefits are kept local. The study suggests that while at the moment the benefits are small and erratic, indigenous ecotourism makes useful contributions, albeit in a small way, to poverty alleviation through income generation, job creation, creation of market for locally produced goods, voluntary charitable donations, provision of infrastructure and social services, improvement of local livelihoods and spinoff activities. The study concludes that the Amboseli region has enormous potential for indigenous ecotourism which, if well planned and managed, can make useful contributions to rural development and poverty alleviation.

**Key Words:** Maasai; Community; Indigenous ecotourism; Sustainable development; Poverty alleviation.

### INTRODUCTION

Kenya is one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2015, it was ranked number 146 out of 188 countries surveyed in the Human Development Index (HDI) which measures basic human development achievements in a country using a composite of three basic dimensions: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living (UNDP, 2016). Despite Kenya being endowed with considerable amounts of natural resources including fertile land, good tropical climate, wildlife and human resource, the number of people living in absolute poverty is unacceptably high with some estimates suggesting that nearly half (47%) of the country's population of about 46 million people live below the country's own poverty line of US\$ 1 per a day (Ondicho, 2016; World

Bank, 2016). While the country has since independence in 1963 made impressive economic progress, poverty has been persistent and appears to be increasing particularly in the most remote arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of northern-eastern and southern parts of Kenya where a large majority of pastoralist communities particularly the Maasai reside.

Kenya has embraced tourism and particularly ecotourism as one of the strategies for poverty eradication through generating income and employment opportunities for poor people in destination areas (Sindiga, 1999; Barasa, 2010; Ondicho, 2017). Most importantly, ecotourism is professed as a promising novel approach for generating revenues to use in local conservation of biodiversity and economic development activities in tourism resource rich areas which will in turn lead to poverty reduction (Manyara, 2006; 2007; Barasa, 2010; Ondicho, 2012). While the economic viability of ecotourism has increasingly been questioned and a subject of criticism (see for example: Manyara, 2005; Scheyvens, 2009; Mbaiwa, 2015), it is still viewed as one of the sectors with a great potential to provide solutions to current and pressing problems in many developing countries including declining economies, natural resource depletion and environmental degradation as well as escalating levels of rural poverty (Gitonga, 2011; Ariya & Momanyi, 2015; Mbaiwa, 2015). Scholars (Olindo, 1991; Sindiga, 1999; Watkin, 2003) argue that ecotourism in Kenya has enormous potential to generate revenues which can be ploughed back into conservation and preservation of biodiversity including wildlife, fragile and threatened natural areas. Tourism is a major source of foreign exchange earnings, employment and wealth creation in Kenya (Akama, 2000; KNBS, 2017). This contention is confirmed by the fact that tourism is Kenya's third largest single source of foreign exchange earnings after tea and horticulture and in 2016 it earned the country US\$ 6.7 billion in current prices. The industry also accounts for 9.8% of GDP, contributes between 10–12% of the overall wage employment and 19.2% of total export earnings (World Atlas Data, 2017). This demonstrates that policy makers, scholars, practitioners, development professionals are persuaded to believe that ecotourism can provide an alternative form of economic development that can make enormous contributions not only to conservation but also towards enhancing local livelihoods and improving the standards of living for poor people in destination areas.

However, there is also an argument that ecotourism among indigenous communities is notorious for perpetuating unequal social and economic relations and generating erratic and disproportionate income for poorer members of the host community (Manyara, 2005; Scheyvens, 2009; Barasa, 2010). Although in some cases indigenous communities have benefited from successful ecotourism ventures, in other cases ecotourism has failed to provide the anticipated benefits to the communities whose heritage resources form part of the tourist attraction (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Mbaiwa, 2015). Scholars (Reid et al., 1999; Meguro & Inoue, 2011; Ondicho, 2012) suggest that local communities are often at the forefront in service provision but when it comes to benefits they are always relegated to the back burner because control is firmly vested in foreign companies. For community-based ecotourism to promote sustainable development, it must

ensure that economic benefits are accessible to the local people, host communities have secure land tenure over the area ecotourism takes place and communities are empowered to make land use decisions (Charnley, 2005; Meguro & Inoue, 2011; Ondicho, 2012). Ecotourism must also promote social equity and political justice goals to the local communities (Zeppel, 2006). Charnley (2005) has further argued that if these three factors are left unaddressed, they restrict people's capacity to appreciate the economic benefits of ecotourism.

This has proven to be the case with some Maasai communities in the Amboseli region of Kenya. Despite wildlife ecotourism in Amboseli national park generating significant income through international tourism, it is the indigenous Maasai people who receive the least amount of benefits from this development process (Stanonik, 2005; Ondicho, 2010). Adams & Hutton (2007) have argued that alienating native lands to create national parks, exclusion of land owners from utilizing critical natural resources in the parks and human-wildlife conflicts outside the park contribute to the marginalization of and poverty of rural communities. In response to these shortcomings, Maasai communities living in and around Amboseli national park are turning to indigenous ecotourism as an income generator and means to enhance their livelihoods. Indigenous ecotourism literally means ecotourism activities conducted in, operated and interpreted by local communities in tribal lands (Zeppel, 2006). This concept is clearly distinguished from wildlife ecotourism, in the sense that, it aims to return equitable benefits to the local people whose land, labour, knowledge and culture are used as part of the tourism experience (Mvula, n.d.). In his study of Maasai involvement in tourism development in the Amboseli region, Ondicho (2010) concluded that Maasai cultural bomas tourism (as a form of indigenous ecotourism) appeared to be a more equitable form of development because ownership and control are firmly vested in local hands, tourist activities are run by the Maasai people themselves according to their own priorities, local aspirations and knowledge, creates employment for poor people with very little or no formal education and training and reduces leakages thus ensuring that tourist revenues are kept local. It therefore becomes an ideal candidate for poverty alleviation and it is from this angle that indigenous ecotourism is analyzed to evaluate its role as a poverty eradication strategy for the Maasai people in the Amboseli region of Kenya.

## DEFINITION AND THE ECOTOURISM IMPERATIVE

There is no universally agreed upon definition of the concept of ecotourism. A literature search indicates that there are more than 30 different definitions of ecotourism. Different conservationists, tourism practitioners and scholars define and apply the concept of ecotourism differently in different contexts (Mbaiwa, 2015). Despite many ambiguous applications, there are some definitions that are widely accepted and applied in many contexts. One of the earliest and most influential definitions of ecotourism is that by Ceballos-Lascuráin who defined

ecotourism as “travelling to relatively undisturbed and uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996: 20).” However, the most widely accepted and used definition of ecotourism is that by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), which defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people, involves interpretation and education (TIES, 2015).” As ecotourism’s popularity has grown, its definition has been expanded to include seven elements: respect for local culture, travel to natural areas, minimizes impact, builds environmental awareness, provides direct financial benefits for conservation, and empowerment for local people and supports human rights and democratic movements (Honey, 2008).

Generally, ecotourism is perceived as a responsible and environmental friendly form of tourism which contributes to sustainable development of local communities (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). The essential elements of ecotourism are to minimize the negative physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts, create environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, provide direct financial benefits for conservation, generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry, deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climates, and recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people and work in partnership with them to create empowerment (Watkin, 2003; Mbaiwa, 2015; TIES, 2015). Ecotourism is therefore presumed to be a potential force for sustainable rural development, poverty reduction and economic growth through income generation and creation of employment for disadvantaged and marginalized host communities. Most importantly, ecotourism has been embraced by many developing countries as a mechanism for economic empowerment of local communities through a fair distribution of its economic benefits and enhancement of local livelihoods.

Ecotourism is a relatively new concept which has gained currency from the late 1980s as a lucrative mechanism for generating revenues for local conservation and economic development activities (Watkin, 2003; Mbaiwa, 2008; 2015). It has over the past three decades grown steadily to become one of the fastest growing branches of the international tourism industry (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Mbaiwa, 2015). Goodwin (1996 cited in Mbaiwa, 2015: 204) estimated that in 2000 the profits from ecotourism and environmental friendly tourism were US\$ 50 and 300 billion respectively. The sector has over the years continued to record impressive growth rates of between 10–12% per year which is 3 times higher than mass tourism (TIES, 2006 cited in Coria & Calfucura, 2012: 47). Because of its very nature, ecotourism is considered by governments, tourists, policy-makers, academia, conservationists, local communities and other stakeholders to be one of the main avenues through which the poor can participate in tourism (Ashley et al., 2000). Mbaiwa (2015) discusses the significance of community-based ecotourism in locations where host people are encouraged to

become involved in developing their own small-scale tourism enterprises which they can manage and operate according to their own terms. Scholars (Watkin, 2003; Stronza, 2007; Mbaiwa, 2015) argue that ecotourism is not only a driver for generating revenues which can be ploughed back into conservation and economic development activities, but also a viable tool for poverty alleviation.

Researchers in support of ecotourism in indigenous areas suggest that ecotourism is an equitable form of development (Zeppel, 2006) with enormous potential to address conservation and poverty problems that affect communities in destination areas (Mbaiwa, 2008; 2015; Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Ceballos-Lascuráin (1996) argues that if ecotourism is designed in a way that it benefits the host community, tourist numbers are kept small, and the negative impact on the environment minimized, then ecotourism has the potential to make positive environmental, economic and cultural contributions to indigenous communities in remote rural areas. Ecotourism is appealing because of the following reasons. First, many developing countries have a huge potential for ecotourism as they possess a myriad of natural attractions and tourism industries which generate significant amounts of income and employment (Sindiga, 1999; Zeppel, 2006). These natural attractions are usually located in marginal areas away from mainstream development on land owned by indigenous communities, and where traditional land use and natural resource utilization practices have maintained biodiversity in fragile or pristine ecosystems (Zeppel, 2006). Secondly, unlike mass tourism, eco-tourists are motivated by a desire to leave a positive impact i.e., ecotourism attracts fewer tourists; promotes respect for host communities and their traditional customs, minimizes the negative impacts and generates direct benefits for the local people who provide support services to eco-tourists (Sindiga, 1999; West & Carrier, 2004 cited in Coria & Calfucura, 2012: 47). Finally, ecotourism has a positive resonance with destination communities because they own the land and natural resource base, and they possess indigenous ecological knowledge which is critical for ecotourism development (Rutten, 2004).

Proponents and some scholars believe that ecotourism activities using natural resource attractions can be an important livelihood opportunity and source of economic diversification in the destination areas (Ashley et al., 2001; UNWTO, 2002). For example, in Kenya the government annually cedes 25% of entrance fees to communities bordering national parks. These revenues are used to support community development projects including provision of bursaries for children to access education and to cushion households against the direct and indirect costs associated with loss of access to land and natural resources (Ondicho, 2010). The best example is 11 N'gvesi Community-Based Ecotourism Project in Kenya which, due to its positive economic impacts on the local residents, was awarded the Equator Initiative Award at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002 (Manu & Kuuder, 2012). The Buhoma Rest Camp near Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda is another good example of community-based ecotourism project that is not only 100% owned by the local people but also generates numerous direct economic benefits for community members. Income from this ecotourism project is used

to fund community infrastructure projects, to support education activities and community groups engaged in income generating projects. Community members have also been trained on various aspects of the tourist industry and are employed locally by tour operators. These examples have demonstrated that ecotourism can and does yield positive results and fulfills the goals that it advocates for.

One of the methods of achieving the socio-economic and physical benefits of ecotourism and thereby lead to poverty alleviation is through active community participation in all aspects of ecotourism including developing a tourism product which the whole community is happy to present to tourists (Sofield et al., 2004). Scheyvens (1999) argues that from a development point of view, eco-tourism can only be considered successful and beneficial when ownership and control are firmly vested in the hands of the local communities. The extent to which active local participation in ecotourism and product development can be achieved, especially within context of the Maasai in Kenya is arguable, because Maasai communities are not a homogenous group of people with one goal in life. However, indigenous ecotourism appears to be fitting the bill and therefore it is necessary to examine how this form of tourism has contributed to poverty alleviation.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### I. Pro-Poor Tourism: Putting Poverty at the heart of the Tourism Agenda

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) has been in vogue use since the 1990s when the United Kingdom's Department for International Development's (DFID) set out to investigate the potential of tourism in poverty alleviation (DFID, 1999). PPT has ever since generated great interest from governments, stakeholders and researchers in industry as well as international development organizations including donors and investors. Many governments especially those in the developing countries and international development organizations such as the United Nations (UN), international development organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank (WB) have all embraced and advocated PPT as a means of alleviating poverty in developing economies (World Bank, 2006; Hawkins & Mann, 2007). To affirm the significant role tourism was going to play in economic development and poverty alleviation, PPT was picked by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as one of the overarching strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly the first one (MDG 1) which sought to reduce, by 2015, the number of poor people in the world by half. Subsequently, UNWTO came up with the Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty Initiative (ST-EP) and Foundation in 2002. The main aim of STEP is to encourage the promotion of activities that promote sustainable tourism (economic, ecological and social) with a focus on poverty alleviation through the development and creation of jobs for people living on

less than 1 US\$ a day (UNWTO, 2010). The United Nations General Assembly further affirms that PPT can make useful contributions to poverty alleviation, conservation and community development in line with the current global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNGA, 2015).

PPT has been defined as “tourism that generates net benefits for the poor” (DFID, 1999: 7) or rather increases net benefits for the poor (i.e., benefits are greater than the costs) (Ashley et al., 2001: viii). The DFID explains that PPT is not a tourism product but rather a general tourism development and management strategy through which linkages are created between tourism businesses and poor people with the sole aim of unlocking opportunities for the needy to benefit from tourism, improve their livelihoods and participate in the decision making processes (Scheyvens, 2009). Basically, PPT moves beyond ‘the trickle-down theory’ of mainstream tourism and underscores the importance of opening up and enlarging opportunities for the poor to enjoy the economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits of tourism (DFID, 1999; Jamieson et al., 2004). Ashley et al. (2000) have, in their seminal paper, acknowledged the potential of the tourism industry to contribute to poverty alleviation. They, however, argue that in the past international donors and national governments with an interest in tourism development did not take into account the ‘needs’ and opportunities for the poor as they were pre-occupied with provision of incentives to increase private investments and infrastructure in the sector. They further highlight that PPT through ecotourism has enormous potential and capacity to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty (Ashley et al., 2001).

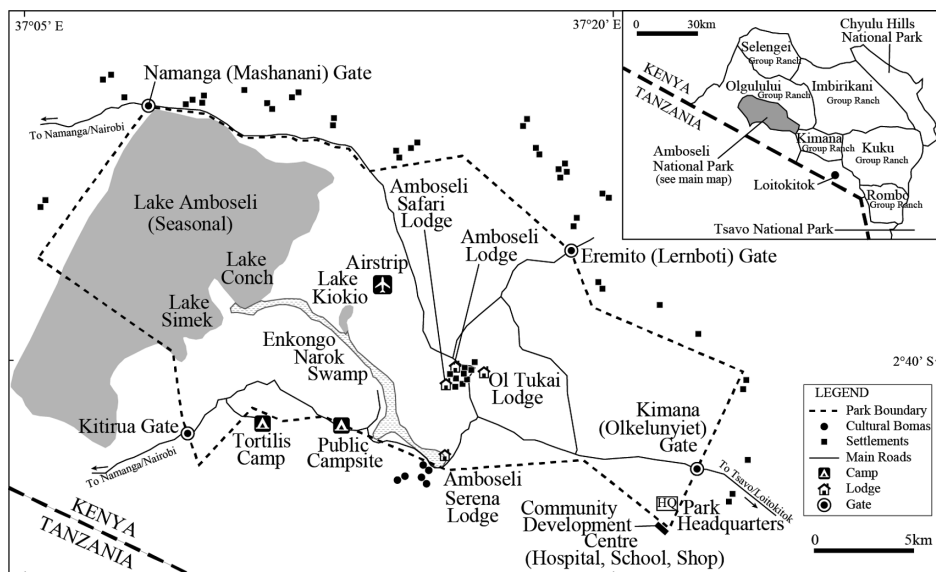
According Goodwin (2009) any form of tourism can be pro-poor if: one, it brings economic benefits in the form of income and employment opportunities as well as business opportunities through better access to tourism markets for locally produced goods and artifacts for poorer community members; two, it brings livelihood benefits such as access to drinkable water, improved infrastructure and amenities such as roads, schools, and health facilities to poor people; and three, provides opportunities and enhances the capacity of the poor to participate in making decisions aimed at improving their livelihoods. The main assumption is that tourism in the developing countries should provide opportunities for marginalized and underprivileged people to benefit from the resources in their midst. Thus, local participation in tourism benefits is very instrumental in reducing poverty through pro-poor tourism strategies (UNWTO, 2007; 2010). Involving host communities in benefit sharing, decision-making processes and management of tourism do motivate local people to undertake conservation of their natural and cultural resources that attract tourists to their locality (Scheyvens, 2007). However, people within the community will not draw equal benefits from tourism (Stronza, 2007). It is therefore imperative to undertake research to determine how the benefits from ecotourism contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.



## II. Study Site

This paper is based on a qualitative research carried out in the Amboseli region of Kenya. The area contains one of the most famous national parks in the world in the midst of the Maasai, a semi-nomadic group of subsistence pastoralists (Fig. 1). The park which covers 392 km<sup>2</sup> is at the core of an 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> ecosystem that spreads across the Kenya-Tanzania border. The remainder of the Amboseli ecosystem which falls within a semi-arid to arid zone is divided into seven communally owned group ranches and individually owned plots and ranches. According to the latest National Population Census Report, the total population of Amboseli was 137,495 in 2009 (KNBS, 2010). The bulk of the land is used for livestock herding, the main source of livelihood for more than 80% of the Maasai people who have lived in this area for hundreds of years. However, arable farming, sand harvesting and tourism have also increasingly become major land use activities. Many people in Amboseli directly or indirectly rely on natural resources to sustain their livelihoods. Thus, low and erratic rainfall plus shortage of land are major constraints to development (Reid et al., 1999).

Due to the region's rich wildlife diversity, scenic beauty and the allure of Mt. Kilimanjaro, Amboseli has become a major destination for international tourists. Wildlife viewing and a game safari in the park and surrounding ecotourism sites dominate the tourism activities that are undertaken in the region. While wildlife ecotourism generates a huge amount of money, the Maasai people who coexist with wildlife on their land receive only token benefits yet they are the ones who bear the costs of conservation (Mwale, 2000; Mburu, 2004). These costs



**Fig. 1.** Study sites

are manifested through such incidents as people being killed or injured by wild animals, loss of livestock through predation, competition for pasture and water, wildlife invasions of crop farms and food stores, inadequate or lack of compensation for losses or injuries and lost opportunity of using land (Rutten, 2004; IPAR, 2005). Wildlife related costs are a major source of food insecurity, natural resource depletion and degradation as well as poverty among the Maasai people in the region.

In response to these shortcomings, the Maasai people have organized themselves into groups which have, over the past three or so decades, initiated their own community-based indigenous ecotourism ventures as a means of earning direct tourism income, and diversifying their sources of livelihood. The study focused on six such cultural bomas located on the southern edge of Amboseli national park in Olgulului Ololarrashi group ranch in the Amboseli region. An increasing number of the Maasai people are turning to cultural boma-based indigenous ecotourism as an alternative means to enhance their livelihoods, stimulate socio-economic development and alleviate poverty through selling their traditional arts and crafts, performing ritual song and dance, posing for photographs with tourists and displaying their culture and homesteads as a tourist attraction. The Maasai people in the Amboseli region, therefore, provide a good case study for analyzing indigenous ecotourism as a poverty eradication strategy.

### III. Data Collection

The data used in this article was collected in the months of November and December 2015 using mixed methods or triangulation. Data were derived from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews, secondary sources and personal observation. Personal observation included interaction with key stakeholders in the tourism industry both at the national and local levels as well as within the local Maasai community. The author of this paper has also previously conducted research in this area on local community involvement in tourism development which has been used to support some of the arguments advanced in this paper.

The main method for primary data collection was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 80 people directly involved in indigenous ecotourism. These people were divided into 4 males and 4 women only groups each comprising of 10 participants selected from across all the cultural bomas. The FGDs were held in a classroom in the local primary and each lasted between one and half to two hours. The sitting arrangement was circular; this helped not only to facilitate discussion but also to make every participant visible. All the FGDS except one were conducted in the Swahili language. The discussions were facilitated by the researcher using a focus group guide with the help of a note taker. They were asked open ended questions using a semi-structured FGD guide. The questions revolved around issues such as the reasons for their involvement in indigenous ecotourism, tourism activities they were involved in and the benefits obtained

from those activities, the different ways in which ecotourism contributed to poverty alleviation and whether they considered ecotourism a viable strategy for poverty eradication.

To complement data from FGDs, 8 key informant interviews were conducted with 2 local administrators (chiefs), 2 head teachers, 2 women leaders and 2 people from KWS (Kenya Wildlife Service). Key Informants were selected on the basis of their expert knowledge on indigenous ecotourism and poverty in the study area. The interviews were semi-structured, conversational meetings which promoted familiarity with the participants and the principle issues under investigation. The issues raised in the Key Informant Interviews provided the necessary backup knowledge on the role of indigenous ecotourism in poverty reduction. During my one month of fieldwork I was able to observe the participants and their lifestyles and discern the poverty situation. Additional data was obtained from different secondary sources including government policy documents, academic journals, published and unpublished reports, research reports and theses and other relevant documents. A thorough critical literature review was undertaken to generate additional information which has been used to confirm and verify the findings of this study.

The data generated was qualitative and as a result, thematic and content were used in the analysis of field data. The first step in the data analysis process was the translation into the English language for further analysis. The researcher read and reviewed repeatedly all the translated transcripts and field notes for complete and clear understanding. Key themes were identified and summaries outlining the points on each theme made by the participants isolated to create patterned responses within the data set. Data relating to each theme were carefully cross examined to ensure that the resulting material reflected the data. Information collected from secondary sources was subjected to content analysis and has been used to support key contentions in this paper.

## RESULTS

The aim of this study was to investigate the potential of indigenous ecotourism as a strategy for poverty alleviation among communities through the lens of PPT. The Maasai people living on the periphery of Amboseli national park in southern Kenya provide the empirical case on which the contribution of indigenous ecotourism to poverty alleviation has been examined. The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide a descriptive analysis of how indigenous ecotourism is helping the Maasai people to alleviate poverty. Basically, qualitative research answers questions of meaning while quantitative studies focus on how many and how much. Typically, the intent of a quantitative research approach is to make generalizations about the whole population based on data collected from a representative sample. This was not the intent of this study.

Before making a presentation of the findings of this study, it is important to note that the Maasai people in the Amboseli region still continue languish in

poverty despite too much tourism going on around them. While a few of them have started to invest in indigenous ecotourism and assumed an entrepreneurial role, a majority of them are still reluctant to accept the trappings of 'modernization' and instead, continue to lead their traditional livestock-oriented lifestyles. Despite facing constraints such as shrinking land base, environmental degradation, natural resource depletion, increasing human population and escalating levels of poverty, they still value livestock to the extent that numbers more important than quality by virtue of cattle being their main source of wealth and status in the community. Subsequently, much effort is devoted to cattle ownership and rearing/keeping. There is a veritable amount of literature on the Maasai people and their culture so this section will not delve into this subject further. Suffice to say that a number of the Maasai in the study area have embraced indigenous ecotourism as a poverty eradication strategy.

### I. Maasai Involvement in Indigenous Ecotourism

Maasai involvement in indigenous ecotourism revolves around cultural bomas. Cultural bomas are basically an indigenously homegrown tourism initiative in which the Maasai people of Amboseli have sought to exert closer commercial control over their culture and to harness it for the tourist dollars (Stanonik, 2005; Ondicho, 2010). A *cultural boma* is essentially a mock Maasai village built like a true homestead occupied by Maasai entrepreneurs to attract tourists and generate direct income through selling their artifacts directly to tourists or rather without going through middlemen (Charnley, 2005). These cultural bomas are set up as commercial ecotourism enterprises by groups of Maasai people who want to display their culture for economic gain. The bomas give tourists the chance to meet the Maasai people in their own terms and to learn more about their exotic culture, to photograph them in their traditional costumes, and perhaps to buy some of their carefully designed arts and crafts (Charnley, 2005; Ondicho, 2010). Within this context, it can be argued that the Maasai are incorporated into indigenous ecotourism in a dual capacity: firstly, as entrepreneurs and managers of their own enterprises, and secondly, as 'objects of the tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990) willingly displaying themselves to be observed and photographed as a supplementary tourist attraction to wildlife in the park.

There were 6 operational cultural bomas located within a radius of 3 km from each other and about 2 km from the southern edge of Amboseli national park. Certainly, their growth is a recent phenomenon. While the first Maasai cultural boma-based ecotourism enterprise in the Amboseli region was established in the late 1980s, most of them have developed over the last two decades as an alternative economic development initiative (Charnley, 2005; Stanonik, 2005). Cultural bomas as an indigenous form of ecotourism offer an attractive option for the Maasai people wanting to exert greater commercial control over their cultural heritage and to establish income generating activities based on their rich cultural heritage within their communities in the communal group ranch lands around Amboseli national park. Basically, cultural bomas aim at returning

equitable benefits to the local people in whose land, natural resources, labour, knowledge and culture are used as part of the tourism experience (Ritsma & Ongaro, 2002; Mvula, n.d.). Partly due to increased tourist demand and increasing number of the Maasai people joining the tourism business, a plethora of indigenous ecotourism cultural bomas replicating the original model have sprung up in an unplanned fashion in the group ranches around Amboseli national park over the last two decades (Ondicho, 2010; Mvula, n.d.). Each boma has between 50–100 people working in ecotourism and between 10–30 people who trek to the bomas daily to serve tourists.

The number of visitors to each boma per year is largely unknown because the villages do not keep any records. However, through personal observations the level of visitation to each boma was estimated to be about 4–5 tourist vans a day, with an average of 6 tourists per a vehicle. However, the level of visitation varies with the tourism seasons i.e. low season (August to June) and high season (July to September). Tourists who visit the boma originate from the game lodges in the park and are normally delivered to the bomas in a tour operator or lodge vehicle between 9–12 and/or 2–4 pm after and/or before their morning and evening game drives respectively. They are then entertained with ritual song and dance outside the boma entrance by villagers dressed in their traditional costumes after which an appointed cultural boma guide escorts visitors around the village. During the visit, the guide (in English) explains various aspects of the Maasai culture, traditions and sustenance techniques, and tourists are shown how to light fire, treated with a display of Maasai customary artifacts including herbal medicine, followed by a look inside one of the huts. Thereafter, visitors are taken to the village curio market at the back of the boma where each villager sells his/her locally made curios directly to tourists. Suffice to say that this is the standard procedure in all the cultural bomas.

The tourists who arrive in the cultural bomas pay their host US\$ 20 each directly as entrance fee. However, all the monies paid as entrance fees are used to bribe tour drivers and guides to deliver tourists to respective bomas (Ondicho, 2010; Mvula, n.d.). The villagers subscribe to these exploitative tendencies because they believe that the tour drivers/guides have all the power in the tourism industry to decide where they take tourists and therefore without paying them a commission they may choose not to take their clients to these villages. Sometimes, to secure the maximum benefit the tour guides/drivers trade one boma off against another and they operate this inequitable income sharing arrangement throughout the region. Therefore the only avenue through which the Maasai earn direct tourist income is through selling individually curios to tourists. From personal observations each individual can sell an average US\$ 50–100 a week worth of curios. However, business is not consistent and sometimes entrepreneurs can go for a whole month especially during the low tourist season without selling anything. Part of the reason for the declining business is an oversupply of cultural bomas in the area leading to intense competition within and between villages for business. Surprisingly, little anthropological research has been conducted in Kenya generally and among the Maasai in

particular to gauge the suitability of indigenous ecotourism as a strategy for poverty alleviation. This study was therefore a response to that challenge.

## BENEFITS FROM INDIGENOUS ECOTOURISM

The participants in this study listed a wide range of benefits that they have accrued from their cultural bomas-based indigenous ecotourism ventures; most of them related to income and employment generation, enhancement and diversification of local livelihoods and community development. These benefits are discussed as follows:

### I. Financial Benefits

In the Amboseli region, direct indigenous ecotourism related income was generated from entrance fees, sale of handicrafts, posing for photographs with tourists, guiding within the community, nature walks, performing ritual song and dance as well as ceremonies. However, obtaining accurate data on individual and household income levels from respondents is usually difficult as was the case in this study (Luvaga & Shitundu, 2003). It was not possible, for example, to ascertain the exact amount of income each boma generated from entrance fees and households derived from their individually owned handicraft businesses no records are kept either by cultural boma officials or families. Through personal observation it was estimated that each boma earned about US\$ 300 a day from entrance fees. However, the impact of this income was not felt at the local level as it was used to bribe tour drivers and guides to deliver tourists. Most of the people working in indigenous ecotourism derived much of their income from selling individually owned curios directly to tourists. It was estimated that each individual on average sold between US\$ 50–100 a week worth of curios. However, the amount of income earned varies between households depending on whether in high or low season. For some households, ecotourism was the primary source income while for others it was a secondary source of additional income to supplement their other economic activities (Ritsma & Ongaro, 2002).

Scholars (Manyara, 2006; Mbaiwa, 2015) suggest that ecotourism can generate extra income for poor families and households which can be used to diversify their other economic activities. Informal interviews conducted as part of this study indicated that without this added income many Maasai people in the cultural bomas would not participate in ecotourism. FGD participants indicated that they viewed indigenous ecotourism as a feasible means of earning income to diversify their livelihoods (Charnley, 2005; Mbaiwa, 2015). It can be argued that while the income from indigenous ecotourism is no huge at the moment, it does help supplement their other activities. Without this added income, the Maasai could not participate in ecotourism and wildlife conservation. For the Maasai communities in Amboseli, ecotourism was providing individuals and families with a golden chance to increase their household income in a feasible

manner without destroying the environment and depleting natural resources. Indigenous ecotourism is therefore a socio-economic activity that the Maasai people can ill afford to ignore or live without because of the money it provides.

The study established that people working in ecotourism no longer have time to raise livestock, grow their own food, thus they depend on others to supply them with foodstuffs and other basic necessities which they purchase with income earned from ecotourism. Auxiliary economic activities in the community such as bicycle/motorbike taxi business, currency laundering and petty trade in foodstuffs have sprung up to meet demand triggered by ecotourism income. These activities were also important avenues through which some villagers indirectly earned ecotourism related income. In this way, people who were not directly involved in ecotourism were also benefiting. This reflects how the economic impacts of indigenous ecotourism were being felt in the study areas through forward and backward linkages with other sectors of the local economy (Mbaiwa, 2015). Part of the income generated both directly and indirectly from indigenous ecotourism was used to support community development projects and to provide social services that are made available to all community members. Ecotourism can therefore be described as a strategy that can promote rural development and alleviate poverty particularly amongst communities in tourism resource rich-areas in Kenya.

## II. Employment Benefits

In most tourism studies, employment is often cited as one of tourism's most important contributions to poverty reduction and a destination's economy (Scheyvens, 2007; Goodwin, 2009). It was observed that approximately between 400 and 500 people in the cultural bomas under study are self-employed in indigenous ecotourism. This suggests that ecotourism activities are important for the livelihoods of the local communities in this region. The study established that generation of employment opportunities was one of the motivating factors for the Maasai people to engage in tourism. Ondicho's (2010) research on Maasai involvement in tourism reported that employment was a head of profit as the main motivating factor for community participation in tourism enterprises. FGDs and informal interviews conducted as part of this study indicate that the opportunity for people without any formal education and training such as women and youth to gain self-employment, to work from home and to combine ecotourism with other traditional livelihood activities was a major driving factor in the desire of the Maasai people in to join the indigenous ecotourism business. It was observed that without formal education, vocational training and business skills a significant number of people in the study area could not gain employment in the formal sectors of the tourism industry. Indigenous ecotourism therefore presented the local people in the cultural bomas with the rare opportunity to earn direct income through direct and indirect self-employment in the informal ecotourism sector.

The highest number of income-generation self-employment opportunities in

indigenous ecotourism in the study communities occurred in the manufacture and sell of curios. Ingles's (2002) study in the Peruvian Amazon revealed that the production of handicrafts can offer families the opportunity to increase their household income. Personal observations and informal discussions conducted as part of this study indicate that nearly all household members including the small children were involved in making handicrafts which were sold to tourists in the cultural boma market. Because the tourists visit the cultural villages and purchase handicrafts directly from individuals, the local people have the opportunity to work within the village as they do not have to travel away from home to access the market. It can therefore be argued that indigenous ecotourism was opening up employment opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in income generating activities in an area that offers little else in terms of alternative opportunities for wage-labour jobs. Though seasonal by its nature, employment in indigenous ecotourism was a welcome opportunity to earn extra income to supplement other activities and to empower communities to manage their enterprises according to their priorities and aspirations. Indigenous ecotourism not only presents equal opportunities for all people to gain employment but also to learn all the business development skills they need to enable them not only to maximize their earnings but also to look after their family and community interests. These interests include sustaining themselves and their families, improving their living conditions and alleviating poverty.

### III. Benefits from Spinoff Activities

The economic benefits of ecotourism can be measured through employment and income multipliers (Luvaga & Shitundu, 2003). Informal interviews and FGDs conducted as part of this study indicated that apart from the direct self-employment, indigenous ecotourism has also created a host of other indirect employment opportunities mainly through linkages with other sectors of the local economy. There were, for example, a number of people who were engaged in various tourist related activities such as petty trade; hawking foodstuffs, currency laundering; providing services such fetching water and offering transport services on bicycles and motorbikes; community tour guide, agricultural crop/fruit and vegetable supplies to people working on ecotourism in the cultural villages. All these are important sources of employment that enabled poor people within the community to earn some form of cash income, thus a multiplier effect on the economy of Amboseli. Ogutu's (2002) research on the impact of ecotourism in Eselenkei recorded that individual households benefited from the sale of different foodstuffs both to tourists and their service providers. The conceptual basis of the ecotourism income multipliers is the belief that injection of cash into a destination economy through direct and induced employment will result in increased incomes for the local people which would enable poor households to spend more on food and other basic necessities, thus leading to improved standards of living and by extension a reduction of poverty.



#### IV. Voluntary Charitable Donations

The other way the Maasai are benefiting from indigenous ecotourism was through voluntary charitable donations by tourists. FGD participants indicated that they had received donations from tourists to support development projects including schools, health facilities, boreholes, churches and bursaries/sponsorship for school children. Firstly, the respondents indicated that all the three boreholes that serve the six cultural villages studied were charitable donations by tourists. These water sources have not only helped to reduce competition for this scarce resource between wildlife and livestock especially during times of prolonged droughts and/or breakdown of community boreholes but also to reduce community vulnerability to drought related disasters (Ogutu, 2002). It was estimated that more than 1,000 people within and outside the six cultural bomas now had access to clean and sustainable drinking water from these three boreholes. This has helped to reduce instances of waterborne diseases within the research communities and to enjoy improved the health status of the local people. Secondly, all the study participants revealed that some classrooms and learning materials at the local primary school were donated by tourists and that some students from needy households had also benefited from bursaries and scholarships donated by tourists.

#### V. Provision of Infrastructure and Social Services

The Maasai were also benefiting from improved infrastructure. The road linking Namanga and Loitokitok town via the national park has been constructed by the government to enable tourist access and mobile telephone services had been extended to the park to serve tourists. Key Informants stated that the road transport networks had improved access to services outside the community including markets and other services such as to medical services, education, markets and colleges which are indicators of poverty (cf. Ondicho, 2010). While the road and telephone services are set up for tourists, the local people were also indirectly benefiting from them. Further, the study revealed that families and households in the cultural bomas indirectly benefited from social amenities such as Olkelunyet dispensary set up not far from the cultural bomas under study and the Ngong Narok primary school located within the cultural bomas.

#### VI. Provision of Market for Locally Produced Goods

The study established that poor people were increasingly investing time and money in income generating enterprises based on their culture to buffer them from economic hardship. These small scale ecotourism ventures provided opportunities for poor people to sell their services and goods especially handicrafts to tourists without passing through middlemen. The advantage is that poor people with no formal education and/or specialized business skills are able to earn direct income from their ecotourism activities through the use of locally available

materials in making handicrafts, and the flexibility of doing business from the comfort of their homes. Selling goods and services was one way of getting visitors to spend directly into the hands of the poor, minimizing leakages and exploitation by middlemen.

## VII. Improving Livelihoods

The study participants stated that ecotourism was helping to supplement and diversify their individual and households sources of income and livelihoods. Whilst earnings were small, unpredictable and seasonal, they fitted in very well with the respondents' other established livelihood strategies. Income from indigenous ecotourism had enabled women and poor families to spend more on food and basic necessities than they could ordinarily afford. In this respect, tourism acted as a supplementary support to Maasai livestock oriented livelihoods and pastoral economy which is vulnerable to the vagaries of climate. Many study participants stated that they were benefiting from livelihood impacts, in the form of increased household food security, improved access to infrastructure such as roads, education and medical care. The impact of these non-cash livelihood impacts was felt not only by the poor but also by all community members as they were dispersed more within the community than direct financial impacts (Scheyvens, 2007).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has shown that indigenous ecotourism has some pro-poor potential through the benefits that accrue to poor people in the Amboseli region. The study established that the Maasai had accrued various types of direct and indirect benefits from their indigenous ecotourism ventures including: employment creation, income generation, creation of market curios and handicrafts/souvenirs, infrastructural benefits and charitable contributions. The generation of employment and income along with other benefits is often stated as one of the primary goals of ecotourism (Rutten, 2004; Charnley, 2005; Meguro & Inoue, 2011). Whilst the benefit that have accrued to the Maasai are not particularly large, they were playing an important role in diversifying and supplementing local livelihoods, stimulating economic development and creating greater multiplier effects all of which made useful contributions towards the improvement of the living standards of poor people. Scholars (Rutten, 2004; Ondicho, 2010; Mbaiwa, 2015) indicate that ecotourism is a lucrative mechanism for the economic prosperity of poverty stricken host communities. This study found that the poor people in the Amboseli region were enjoying the benefits of indigenous ecotourism, albeit in a small way. The study reinforces earlier arguments that ecotourism can be pro-poor if it generates benefits for poor people, even if the richer people gain more (Mbaiwa, 2015). This study argues that indigenous ecotourism in Amboseli is pro-poor because poor people are able to participate fully in all aspects of its development,

exercise ownership and control and are beneficiaries of all events and processes.

Cultural bomas represent a good example of an indigenous ecotourism venture that promotes all the ideals of ecotourism, in the sense that, it presents an opportunity for poor people to participate in tourist activities and benefits, as well as to voice their own concerns and aspirations in its development. This research suggests that indigenous ecotourism has a positive resonance with the Maasai people of Amboseli because it is culturally compatible with their ways of life, it draws on natural and cultural heritage resources and materials that are abundantly available locally, it builds on indigenous knowledge and also allows them to simultaneously engage in their traditional activities (Charnley, 2005; Ondicho, 2010). Scheyvens (2007) has argued that locally owned community-based ecotourism ventures run by the local people according to their priorities are likely to generate more benefits for the host communities. Local ownership and control reduce leakage as the money tourists spend in the community goes directly to local people and the income earned by village entrepreneurs from activities such as selling handicraft is spent within the host community where it creates multiplier effects. This reinforces the earlier argument that indigenous ecotourism can translate into an effective tool for poverty alleviation. This study however, suggests that to maintain a sustainable indigenous ecotourism development in Amboseli, the Maasai may need to diversify their tourism product, reduce oversupply and price competition.

Indigenous ecotourism among the Maasai of Amboseli is symptomatic of the commoditization of culture and it has been shown that turning native cultures in market commodities for tourist consumption has negative impacts for host communities (Ritsma & Ongaro, 2002). More often host communities are projected as powerless victims of tourism development. However, cultural boma-based indigenous ecotourism has demonstrated that host communities are not powerless victims of predetermined western influences as they have manipulated and refined tourism not only to achieve their own socio-economic ends but also redirect its negative impacts. This paper argues that by hosting tourists to their homesteads the Maasai have positioned themselves as the traditional owners of their culture and through ownership and control they have been able to creatively turn the negative impacts of cultural commoditization into economic and cultural opportunities. This confirms Ceballos-Lascuráin (1996) argument that if ecotourism to an indigenous area benefits the host people and the negative impacts are reduced, then it has potential to produce favourable results which among other things may include socio-economic development leading to poverty reduction.

The main objective of the study was to examine the potential of indigenous ecotourism through the lens of PPT among the Maasai people living adjacent to Amboseli national park in Loitokitok sub-county as a strategy for poverty alleviation. The study found out that the Maasai people were involved in a diversity of culture based indigenous ecotourism activities. The study suggests that if these activities are well-planned and developed they can be an engine for poverty alleviation and to enhance community development in the study areas. Nonetheless, indigenous ecotourism as a form of PPT holds great potential

for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. This supports Ondicho's (2010) contention that culture based ecotourism can contribute to poverty alleviation through indigenous ecotourism's benefits. The benefits that have been discussed in the study include income generation, employment creation, provision of social services, and voluntary donations by tourists. The study has also indicated that community ownership and control over indigenous ecotourism activities could generate a higher multiplier effect, whereby the local people supply food and other market commodities to indigenous ecotourism entrepreneurs in the cultural bomas. The net effect of these benefits would be an improved standard of living and sustainable livelihoods, which in turn could contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable rural development.

However, the study has also shown that Maasai participation in indigenous ecotourism was gaining currency in the Amboseli region, especially during the high season which often coincides with the dry season. During this season many people are often in dire need of alternative sources of earning a livelihood as livestock could have been driven to distant places in search of water and pasture by the morans (youth) leaving many people idle. The community was particularly happy that tourists were visiting their cultural bomas to view them in their cultural attire and witness their cultural performances and community live, purchase their handicrafts and learn more about their cultural traditions. They felt that indigenous ecotourism was not only making them popular but also was empowering them to meet tourists on their own terms and to run their community based ecotourism ventures according to their priorities. The study has shown that the Maasai have a huge but unexploited potential for the development of indigenous ecotourism. The study suggests that with proper planning and management, indigenous ecotourism can make very useful and meaningful contributions to poverty reduction and economic rural development. In conclusion, this study has highlighted that community based indigenous ecotourism can be used as a strategic weapon to fight poverty and through which poverty could be defeated in destination areas.

It can therefore be concluded that indigenous ecotourism, like other forms of tourism, can make vital contributions to social and economic development in destination areas and therefore can be used as a viable strategy for poverty reduction at the local, regional and national levels in Kenya. Indigenous ecotourism in Kenya generally and Amboseli specifically has generated a lot of interest among people living in and around game parks and motivated them to participate in its development. It has also received much attention at the national level because of its potential contribution to conservation, revenue generation, employment creation and stimulating economic growth. Maasai cultural boma based indigenous ecotourism has gained a significant amount of success and also is besieged by teething problems which need urgent attention before its full potential can be realized.

This study has highlighted the reality that indigenous ecotourism can be used as a strategy for poverty alleviation as in the case of the Maasai people in the Amboseli region of Kajiado County in Kenya. The positive contributions of

indigenous ecotourism towards the improvement of local livelihoods and income generation activities at this destination has been made possible because ownership and control are vested in local hands with significant benefits accruing to the host community (Ondicho, 2010). The study suggests there is need of greater recognition and support by the government, policy makers and development professionals of indigenous ecotourism for its full potential to be realized and for it to make meaningful contributions to poverty alleviation and attainment of the sustainable development goals. To assist the Maasai to unlock their full tourism potential and for indigenous ecotourism to make meaningful impact as an anti-poverty strategy there is urgent need to conduct a feasibility study to determine its economic viability, marketability, and sustainability. The government should develop guidelines to regulate its operations, assist communities with loans and capacity building to enable poor people to set up their own indigenous businesses, as well as coordinate marketing and promotion of this form of tourism. In this way, indigenous ecotourism can promote the welfare and well-being of the poor, stimulate growth in many related sectors and can play an important role in poverty alleviation.

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